

Introduction

There are a variety of techniques that can help you to develop better awareness and control of the various parts of your body that are usually involved in sex. Kegels (and Reverse Kegels) can assist you in developing better awareness and control of your pelvic muscles. Diaphragmatic breathing (deep breathing) can help to improve your health and wellbeing in a variety of ways.

This leaflet describes these techniques, which can help to improve sexual performance, enjoyment and pleasure.

Pelvic floor exercises

Most women with vaginismus have tight or contracted pelvic floor muscles. These exercises are designed to help you identify, build awareness and relax your pelvic floor muscles.

The pelvic floor muscles lie at the bottom of your pelvic cradle and support your internal organs. They are shaped like a figure eight which encircles the urethra and anus. They are large muscles and are about the same size as the palms of your hands.

When you are on the toilet, stop the flow of urine midstream by tightening or gently lifting your pelvic floor muscles. Repeat this action a couple of times to identify the right muscle groups - not to practice the exercises. Alternatively, you can just imagine you are trying to stop your wee mid-flow.

After practicing the exercises below for about 4-6 weeks, most women notice improved awareness and muscle control.

Deep breathing exercises

Learning to breathe using the diaphragm is an important part of overcoming vaginismus. We often get into the habit of breathing using the upper chest muscles instead of the diaphragm, and this increases pressure on the pelvic floor. By sitting up straight and practicing deep belly breathing, your diaphragm will work properly. Diaphragmatic breathing helps to stimulate the abdominal and pelvic

floor muscles to contract and relax in a healthy way. It will also decrease your blood pressure, reduce your stress levels and improve the circulation of oxygen in your body.

To practice this, sit up straight; consider using a support cushion to make sure that your lower back is in the right place and you're not slouching. Place one hand on your upper abdomen, then breathe in slowly and deeply, focusing on drawing air into your belly and feeling your breath with your hand. Gently breathe out by letting your rib cage fall back into place. Try doing this for a few breaths throughout your day.

Reverse pelvic floor exercises (Reverse Kegels)

Often when women do kegel exercises they are aiming to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles. With Reverse Kegels, we are aiming to relax them as opposed to tense them. It is helpful to start by doing the deep breathing exercises detailed above, while focusing on how the muscles around your anus, vagina and urethra feel as you breathe in and out.

What you are looking for is the same feeling as when you start to go to the toilet; the pelvic floor muscles 'drop' and relax to let urine come out. Lie down on your back with a pillow under your knees, or on your side with a pillow between your thighs. Try to gently relax your pelvic muscles, allowing them to move downwards without straining; think about how they feel when you go to the toilet (it is a good idea to go before you do this to avoid accidents!). It may help to try relaxing your abdominal muscles first, by placing your hand on your navel and allowing your belly to relax and bulge forwards. As you breathe in, imagine the muscles getting longer. Don't move your pelvis as you do this. Keep your spine still and let the movement happen in your pelvic floor.

Practicing Reverse Kegels regularly will help regulate the muscle tone in the pelvic floor and increase your awareness of the pelvic and genital area. It is recommended to build up to two sets of fifteen repetitions (30 in total) per day.